



A Legacy on Canvas - A Painter's Progress By BS Murthy

When we (Bannu, nee, Rohini, and I) became schoolmates, we were barely ten and now as we are seventy plus, he seeks to record his questful journey as a painter to which, by and large, I was privy to. It seems as if life, at the dictates of destiny, had shaped his creative instincts in the mould of applied art, though without robbing him of the artistic impulses of his genes. Now, urged by his artistic impulses to pass through the pathless woods as he sets on a new artistic plane, here I seek to set his biographic course in an auto-biographic mode.

"It was within the four walls of our home that I had the first brush with the animal world; lest it's mistaken that I grew up in a zookeeper's house, I hasten to add that my father was a doctor in the army during the World War II. While the perceptible cracks in the mud walls of our dwelling were the subject of my mother's nagging, to my seeking eyes, they seemed to be line-drawings on a canvas of lime. It was as if the beasts and birds alike left the confines of children's books to ascend to those walls to become 'free birds'. It became my pastime to impart ever newer imageries to the very cracks that my father left to fend for themselves for the sustenance of his umpteen offspring, a norm then, took precedence over the maintenance of his ancestral house. That was in 1952 at Amalapuram, the hub of Konaseema, and I was barely five-year old then.

No sooner I could lay my hands on a paper and pencil than I started dabbling in drawing but it was only in the early high school days that sketching became a compulsive need, so to say, for my very existence. As we had eight notebooks, one for each subject, which, for the best part, those used to come in handy for my assorted drawings. But it was my drawing of Lord Ganesha that caught the eye of one and all, and as most of my classmates were keen to have it redrawn by me on the first page of their notebooks, I became a sort of a junior commissioned artist.

Given my penchant for drawing that's not conducive for clearing examination hurdles, I was wont to adapt the 'important questions' tactic to circumvent my way to the upper echelons of our *zilla parishad* high school. Save the tedious exam time, much of my schooling was fun and frolic for I used to draw caricatures of my teachers, of course, behind their backs that evoked glees of my classmates, though in undertones. Maybe, it was all in our genes (as would be seen later) for my elder brother Suri was also blessed with a good 'drawing' hand but in his inexplicable bid to outshine our father, he chose to lend it to stethoscope, which I suppose he did in the later years.

Having heard about the stress on 'free spirit' in Gurudev's Shantiniketan, I urged my father to let me have a free rein in its arts course but having put his eldest boy on the allopathic

path, our father was hell-bent on heralding me, an younger one, on the ayurvedic course. It was thus, in 1963, I found myself at the grind of botany and zoology in my pre-university course, though given the drawing-leaning syllabi, that was some consolation for me.

Mundane Twist

In time, I received the marching orders from our 'dictatorial doctor' to proceed to an Ayurvedic Medical College in Warangal. With my arts dream having become a daydream by then, and with no plausible explanation to desist the draft, I toed his line, albeit seeing a silver lining in Warangal's historical horizons. The freedom that being away from home affords one, I reckoned would let me be my own man, nay boy, and besides, Warangal with its rich heritage of sculptures, may soothe my ruffled artistic soul as well. And I was proved right on both the counts, during the course of the very first year that is.

While the sense of freedom enabled me to shed the overburden of my father's overbearing presence, the ecstasy of drawing many an exquisite sculptures in the Warangal Fort, so to say, afforded me a sense of fulfillment. As if to provide direction to my talent, during that summer recess, art took me to Peri Subba Rao *garu*, the drawing teacher in Amalapuram's municipal school, who readily took me under his wings. He used to explain about various mediums, arrange still-life subjects to practice besides encouraging me to practice other subjects like landscape, memory drawing. By making me privy to the nuances of drawing and letting me practice under his guiding eyes, it was he, who had laid the stepping stones for my nascent feet to find their moorings.

Well into the second year, while I was getting adept at admixing ayurveda and art for my life's recipe, the latter had apparently chosen to upend the former; how else can one explain that chance acquaintance in 1965 with Madhava Rao, one of its unsung but ardent protagonists. He had been a bright student of the School of Arts, Vizianagaram, founded by Paidiraju *garu*, a legendary artist of that time, but as life would have it, instead of adorning an easel in his studio, he came to dabble at a clerk's desk in an electricity office at Warangal. When he began introducing me to the intricacies in outdoor sketching, water colour painting, folk style painting etc., it was as if he had opened up the vistas of art forms for me to venture into. What's more, the possibilities in the art schools in the then Madras and Bombay that he pictured made our college campus seem to be a cantonment in comparison. As the mental churning began, then came the turning point:

After the annual exams in 1966, instead of heading home, I accompanied Madhava Rao to Ramappa Temple, to be a part of a three-day long art camp to capture its exquisite temple sculptures in sketches and drawings, and it was that captivating experience which catapulted me onto a new course of life.

Artistic Turn

On our way back to Warangal, sitting by the window side in that bus, with summer wind blowing at my face, I could perceive the winter setting in my life. It became obvious to me that ayurveda held no formulation for the fruition of my passion though I happened to top the class; what a transformation from being a backbencher till my pre-university course! So, when I wanted to opt out, I encountered an unexpected hurdle in the form of the principal, who would not let me go. But yet, I prevailed over him to burn my bridges to Warangal, as a fait accompli, and make bold with my father, to vent out my intent to reset my life on my predestined course.

Well, he was as overbearing as ever but as much water had flowed under the bridge of my self-confidence, I held my ground regardless. So did he and the stalemate did continue that is in spite of my mother's best efforts to break the ice. And to buttress my position, I was getting my amateur paintings and sketches published in *Andhra Prabha*, a popular Telugu Weekly of that era, of course for remuneration, though meager,

Maybe, impressed with my artistic potential for make a living, or more probably owing to the innate parental malleability, when my father eventually relented, I entered the portals of the College of Fine Arts, Madras, of course, at Madahva Rao's behest.

Madras Sojourn

I happened to become chums with two of my seniors, A. Srinivasulu, whose father A.K. Sekhar was an art director in the film industry and Thota Tarani, the son of Venkateswara Rao, also in the same calling. Often, partaking food in a restaurant near our campus, while the servers were at satiating our palates, the duo enabled me to clear the cobwebs from my amateur easel. Till then, I was wont to practice by imitation, of the renowned Bapu's illustrations, the fallacy of which I could only grasp through their counseling, and that helped me in finding my own moorings from then on.

But things weren't quite shaping up in the applied art front at the college; while it was my covenant with my father that I would earn my livelihood through applied art, the primacy accorded to painting, even in the commercial art classes, unerringly portended its unintended breach. Moreover, the cultural smell in the air and the language slant on the ground made me feel ill at ease in the otherwise marvelous Madras. So, I decided to shift my 'arts' base to Hyderabad, the peerless city of pearls.

Hyderabad Anchorage

Having joined the College of Fine Arts and opting to be a day scholar, I pursued *pakasastra* as well with *pravinaya* and that afforded visceral satisfaction to me and the stream of classmates, who used to grace my quarters. Besides being co-ed, our class was truly cosmopolitan; there were around twenty-five students, nearly half of them girls – Anitha Lahiri, a Bengali, Sarojini Abhyankar, a Maharashtrian, Shehnaz Arnii, a Sindhi, Zainab Hussain, Zam Zam Yousuf, Bilquis, Anuradha, all locals. Among boys were Hassan, Shabbir, Behram, Mistry a Parsi, Devdas, to name a few.

We had such a faculty, which any fine arts college would aspire to possess. While Vidyabhushan, Sayeed Bin Mohammed, Vasudev Kapatral, Kondapalli Seshagiri Rao and Gowrishankar, inimitable teachers all, excelled in painting subjects, the redoubtable N.P. Vittal, Madhusudana Rao and Godsey Sir mastered the applied (commercial) arts. No wonder that with such faculty at work, our alma mater could boast of B. Narsing Rao and Thota Vaikuntam, who became world renowned in later years.

However, when I was in second year, as art would have it, as though to enable Madhava Rao to resume his role as a friend, philosopher and guide, he was transferred to Hyderabad. Thus, at long last, being at peace with myself, I applied myself to my task, body and soul that enabled me to make a mark at the top of the class. While going through the two year integrated grind of painting, sculpture and applied art, yet, as my passion for painting did not yield the whole space to commercial art, I continued to flirt with my love for painting, unabashedly that was. But in the third year, keeping my word given to my father, I opted for the future course of the applied art

Nevertheless, at Madhava Rao's behest, during the following summer, I attended a study camp at Vizianagaram conducted by none other than Paidiraju *garu*, the guru of gurus. While the salient feature of his tutelage was his love and affection for his students, the hallmark of his teaching was to ensure that they had truly grasped the import of what they were taught. What an enriching experience it was indulging in drawing and portrait painting from life, the latter being a program in itself, what with the underlying intricacies in mixing of colours (oils), including skin tone. How blessed I was to have a guru like Paidiraju *garu* and that stint with him made me realize that self-taught painting has its own limitations.

In the following study tour to North India, the insights I had gained in the camp stood me in good stead. Even otherwise, I have had sketched in excess of a couple of hundreds that is besides a handful of water colours, usually landscapes, in the two earlier study tours.

When it came to applied art, guided by N.P. Vittal – a J.J. Institute alumnus - I completed the course with flying colours, passing it with distinction.

Toil of Art

Having worked in an advertising agency in Bombay for a couple of months to gain experience, in 1975, I had set up the Graphic Design Complex, my studio, in Hyderabad to operate as a freelancer. And in 1985, thanks to the growing goodwill and an expanding client base, both in the public and private sector, I made bold to incorporate GDC Creative Advertising Pvt. Ltd., which was like reaching the goal I set for myself for my father's sake. Then in 2008, after over two decades of taxing, yet rewarding, service to my clientele and to the applied art at large, I sold my stake in the agency that stood me in good stead financially and otherwise even.

Rocky Affair

Though my artistic impulses were seeded in the lush green fields of Konaseema, yet they found fruition in the rock formations of the Deccan plateau. Ever since, Hyderabad had become my second home, I always had an eye on the intriguing rocks in intricate formations that abound around its environs.

What with the commercial art burden off my back, I was impelled to start a rocky affair. So I dusted the textural watercolour technique for rock painting that was lying in my mental attic for long – in 2000, Kondapalli Seshagiri Rao *garu*, our revered teacher, who invented it had demonstrated to me. I am ever thankful to him for imparting that unique technique that he had been keeping close to his chest till then

However, by improvising that technique, I worked with gusto to bring alive some of the fascinating rock formations, in the form of umpteen drawings and water colours. And the outcome was "Rock Magic", my first one-man show of more than 90 works, drawings and paintings combined, which was held in Jan 2009 in Hyderabad. While it really rocked, as expected, it was Seshagiri Rao *garu*'s effusive praise that I had perfected his prototype that, so to say, made my life, at least for then.

But then, affairs are affairs and one invariably returns to his or her spouse, which to me is pure art.

First Love

What is said about first love - it can neither be fully remembered nor completely forgotten - has become a truism with regard to my love of art – painting. As the nostalgia of my first love began to overwhelm me, I was seized with an irresistible urge to pursue her, where it all began – in Konaseema.

So, I am in Sakurru, courting my first love in *sankranti* the dwelling I built as a temple for it, all the while thinking, like a young lover would, about the ways and means of winning over the beloved. Hope it's in my destiny to woo my love to call my bidding – painting her to posterity.

Better half and more

I owe to Bhagyalakshmi, my better half, for lovingly putting up with my applied art indulgences and painting dalliances that is besides making my life fruitful by giving birth to our daughter Annapurna, and son Bhimasankaram, whom we respectively named after my mother and father. Even as my daughter (Pandu) became Himadeep's housewife, and gave birth to Brihat, Shanti came into my son's (Patel's) life as working wife.

Now, seeing the three-year old Brihat, linking up shapes like I did when I was five, I am able to visualize fine art horizons beyond our generations for not only Pandu but also Mrudula, my brother Suri's granddaughter, an architect in the making, seemingly bear those artistic genes along with my niece Meena, whose thirteen year-old daughter Sravishta and eleven-year old son Rinesh have been reinforcing those by winning budding artists' awards."

Rohini humbly believes that he has miles to go on the path of painting to reach the 'milestone of art' and hopes it's in his destiny to paint his first love – painting - to posterity. Well, he only knows how long would be his journey to reach the 'artistic milestone', but I, for one, believe that he has the wherewithal to make it to the artistic post. Going by Leo Tolstoy's assertion in 'What is Art' that "any true work of art expresses original thoughts and feelings", even Rohini's applied art, exemplified by lateral thinking, as he would put it, could be qualified as art. The innumerable ad campaigns he conceived, the exceptional logos, including that of GDC he developed and the book jackets he designed for my books, bear testimony to the fact that the artistic spark retained its streak in his applied endeavours.

I hope, for the sake of art, he would reach his goal to paint for posterity.